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ABSTRACT

Teachers at every grade level and in every setting are trying to manage and teach students with an increasing diverse range of needs. This paper describes a collaborative study to observe, record, and assess the impact and outcomes of an integrated approach for teaching skills of self-discipline to students considered to be academically at-risk. In this study, strategies are developed and assessed for democratic management in collaboration with one classroom teacher. The approach emphasizes teaching students fundamental processes for making decisions that are helpful and can contribute to a productive and safe learning community. Specific strategies are designed to help students learn personal responsibility for their own behaviors. The objective was to examine the impact that teaching appropriate decision making skills would have on sustaining a productive learning environment. The study assesses the impact that having regular class meetings will have on helping students remember and use appropriate decision making skills. Following the interventions, teachers report that the class was easier to manage than previous classes. Ensuring flexibility for meeting individual needs by avoiding prefabricated programs was essential for any successful outcome to the study. (Contains 12 references.) (JDM)

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Teaching the Skills of Social Behavior: An Examination of Teaching Mainstream Expectations to Students in the Margins

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Introduction

What does it take to make a classroom safe, productive, and equitable? Are Democratic management strategies effective for preventing problems with even the most troubled of students? In an effort to find answers to these questions, I spent 2 years worth of Monday afternoons, between September of 1997 and June of 1999, with Anne Marie Strangio and her 27 4th and 5th grade students. The purpose of our collaborative study was to closely observe, record, and assess the impact and outcomes of an integrated approach for teaching the skills of self-discipline to students who are considered to be academically at-risk.

Our study placed particular emphasis on teaching her students some fundamental processes for making decisions that are both personally helpful and that contribute to a productive and safe learning community. The strategies for teaching these skills were developed, assessed, and revised continually by both of us as the two years went along. The students also participated in the on-going assessment of the project by offering their input during our regular Monday afternoon class meetings.

Anne Marie teaches in a K-5 Elementary School that has an on-site health care clinic for community outreach and a number of on-site counselors to assist the students and parents living within the school's borders. The school is located in an area that is largely characterized by poverty and has a population that is far more culturally diverse than that of the rest of the town. It is also located in a part of town that is known for incidents of illegal drug sales, violence, and abuse within families. It is a tough neighborhood in which to grow up.

The school district in which the school is situated implemented a policy of open enrollment about 4 years ago. While the policy had very little impact throughout most of

the district, it had a great deal of impact on this one school. Because the real estate values of that part of town are lower, the neighborhood includes young families trying to build equity in a starter home before moving to another, more expensive.

That particular group of homeowners is typically considered to be in the middle class based on their employment and educational backgrounds. Their earning power and work situations also provide them with the resources and time to take advantage of the open school enrollment policy. In other words, they have the ability to transport their students to the schools of their choice. These families make up the majority of parents who moved their children to other schools. Those who remain have lived in the neighborhood for years and are likely to stay there.

The negative results of the enrollment policy were clearly evident throughout the school in which this study was conducted. The school lost approximately a third of its students and the corresponding funds that are attached to enrollment numbers. Entire classrooms were left empty and the students who remained behind knew exactly what was going on and why. As a result, the students were not only academically at-risk, but also deeply discouraged at the social inequities they witnessed as their former classmates went to schools far away from the neighborhoods they shared.

Anne Marie's 27 students included those who not only bear the burdens of poverty. In addition, the class included students who were identified as having fetal alcohol syndrome, those who were diagnosed as being afflicted with Attention Deficit Disorder, those who had parents in jail, those who were sexually abused, those diagnosed as having Serious Emotional Disturbances, those who were learning disabled, and those who were in hiding from an abusive parent.

The state in which this study was conducted has set high academic standards in reading and math for all students and measures the attainment of those standards through the use of statewide testing. Given the personal circumstances of the students and the ways in which those circumstances impacted their learning, they were unlikely to achieve high scores on the tests. Anne Marie and I decided we wanted to do what we could to level the playing field for these young people by teaching them social skills that could help them stay focused on their learning and make appropriate decisions about how to manage their own behaviors in and out of the classroom. Our objectives were to examine the impact that teaching appropriate decision making skills would have on sustaining a calm and productive learning environment. We also wanted to assess the impact that conducting regular class meetings would have on helping students remember and use appropriate decision making skills.

Theoretical Framework

"The difference between building the conditions for self-discipline cooperatively and imposing discipline is the balance point between the traditional classroom and a person-centered classroom. In a person-centered learning environment there is discipline—self-discipline. In the broader context of life, self-discipline is knowledge about one's self and the actions needed to grow and develop as a person." This quote by H. Jerome Freiberg (Beyond Behavorism, 1999) serves as a suitable description for the impetus that led to the two-year study Anne Marie and I conducted. The study, based on theories of Freiberg (1999), McEwan (1999), McEwan Landau (1999), Gathercoal (1997), Kohn (1996), Hoover and Kindsvatter (1997), and others, was designed to

systematically teach skills of self discipline to one group of 4th/5th grade students and then to revisit the skill lessons during class meetings.

The goal of this study was to develop, practice, and assess strategies for democratic management in collaboration with one classroom teacher. Anne Marie and I shared the belief that "Effective democratic management practices can be a source of genuine reward for teachers who go home at the end of the day knowing that their students have been treated respectfully and that their classrooms have been peaceful and productive."(McEwan, 1999) We both agreed to keep the study fluid and flexible, reasoning that with only the two of us involved, we could more quickly evaluate the success of the strategies and make changes as necessary. In addition, if the practices were incorporated into the daily management of the classroom, we would be receiving constant, if anecdotal, feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of what we were doing.

Anne Marie and I agreed that this study would focus on holistic management practices, as opposed to isolated practices for maintaining quiet. Our approach was to design specific strategies to help her students learn personal responsibility for their own behaviors. Many of the students in Anne Marie's classroom come from difficult home situations, as I stated earlier, and struggle through their schoolwork. Their poor social skills not only interfere with their academic success but also serve as a barrier to establishing positive peer relationships. The resulting academic and social isolation contributes significantly to the likelihood that these students will eventually drop out of school since research indicates a link between the negative effects of failure on-going life patterns. "Success and failure are now used to ascribe social status early in life, and these statuses are documented in school records that follow the children from school to other

institutions, effectively locking them into particular tracks. Under such circumstances it is difficult to teach—if teaching is seen as organizing classrooms to assure learning." (Smith, Gilmore, Goldman, & McDermott, 1993)

Methods of Inquiry

Anne Marie and I had done sufficient background reading by the authors who are cited above to know that we were on the right track with this study. We knew that the skills we planned to teach her students would provide them with a broader range of choices about their life. In other words, the skills we intended to teach would help them stay in school and, therefore, have more options later. The impetus for the study came from the behavioral problems Anne Marie was facing on a daily basis. She is an excellent teacher, but the population of students in her class has such acute needs and act out those needs in so many ways, that even she can feel overwhelmed. As David and Roger Johnson stated, "Classroom management problems are, by definition, disruptions to the overall cooperative nature of the school. In certain areas, the severity of classroom management problems reflects the problems in the community."

Anne Marie and I had already been working on some curriculum strategies to help her students succeed academically. We still felt, though, that more time was needed to implement curricular practices that would allow for one-on-one or small group tutoring sessions. However, the poor social skills of the students conflicted with their ability to occupy themselves while Anne Marie was working with a reading or math group in another part of the room. We decided that in order to successfully implement her curriculum goals, we also would need to implement a program for teaching the self-

management skills necessary to have her students working on their own while she was attending to each small group.

It was decided that we would begin the teaching of self-discipline skills with some basic lessons on what it means to be a citizen in a democratic classroom. The approach used was interactive and relied on student input into how the classroom would be structured. The year began with time set aside each day during the first two weeks for discussions about how students would interact with each other, with their peers on the playground, with their teacher, with the property in their classroom, and with other school personnel. The impetus for this approach was drawn from such sources as Hoover and Kindsvatter (1997) "The teacher's job is to help students, as individual learners and as members of a group, grow in their ability to be responsible citizens in the class. This implies perceiving students as more than passive recipients; they should be active contributors to the positive learning conditions. When everyone in the classroom has a positive, cooperative, self-determined role (or at least has the opportunity to have that sort of role) in the group's achievement, freedom exists in the most appropriate way."

The classroom rules were based on the balance between student rights as defined by the United States Constitution and their social responsibilities called "Compelling State Interests." This framework of creating a management system based on constitutional rights and responsibilities was originally set out in Judicious Discipline. (Gathercoal, 1997) The lessons in which we taught rights and responsibilities were based on lessons appearing in Practicing Judicious Discipline (McEwan Landau, 1999), a book to which Anne Marie is herself a contributor.

The self-discipline skill lessons took a variety of forms, reflecting Anne Marie's interest in designing curriculum around the various intelligences as defined by Howard Gardner and as exhibited by her students. The lessons were presented by themselves or were integrated into the curriculum. For instance, social studies lessons on the causes of the Revolutionary War led to discussions about how the students might respond to classroom rules that are not fair.

While the theoretical base for the lessons came from readings Anne Marie and I had done together or separately, the actual lessons themselves were created and adapted by us as the study moved along. We made the decision early on to avoid packaged citizenship or character education programs. We both felt that the dynamics of Anne Marie's classroom did not lend themselves to any sort of canned program, sharing the conviction that "Any quick-fix approach to management, however inviting the idea might seem, [does not value] the teacher's abilities to effectively problem solve..."(McEwan, 1999) We agreed that the most effective approach was to develop and adjust the program as we went along to ensure that it would be tailored to the individual needs of her students. Our theory proved accurate when we did try to use pre-written cooperative activities as a follow-up to class meetings. These activities were met with disinterest and proved difficult to manage.

We also agreed that the lessons, canned or not, would not be sufficient for helping these students incorporate self-discipline skills into their decision making practices. As a result, class meetings were added as enhancements to the lessons we were teaching. "The class meeting, because it regularly calls the group together as a conscious, decision-making community, is the single most important support system for eliciting and

strengthening students' best values and behavior." (Lickona, 1991) Our class meetings had a particular format as described in the chapter "Applications of Judicious Discipline: A Common Language for Classroom Management," (McEwan, Gathercoal, & Nimmo) which appears in *Beyond Behaviorism*. (Freiberg, 1999)

Evidence

After some discussion, Anne Marie and I agreed that we would use observations of student behaviors as one way to document how students were progressing in their use of self-discipline skills. We also decided that we would use student discussions during class meetings to determine if we needed to revisit some of the lessons. For instance, during a class meeting one student became upset with another and called him a "Fag." That incident led to our decision to do some role plays on name calling in addition to leading a discussion about how to let others know we are upset without lashing out in a verbal or physical way. Student journals or other written activities were used to ascertain how students were feeling about the nature of the classroom climate they were creating. Finally, interviews that I conducted with students served as a basis for continuing, abandoning, or revising some practices or lessons.

The Human Subjects Review Committee at Oregon State University, where I was located at that time, approved the study each year. The students who participated in the study and their parents signed comprehensive informed consent letters. The letters not only informed parents of how and why the study was being conducted, but also of its dynamic nature. Parents were assured that the study would not compromise or take away any time from the curriculum being taught in the classroom. The school's administrator received a similar letter explaining the study.

There was an N of approximately 27 fourth and fifth grade students participating over the course of the two-year study. Anne Marie has been assigned to have these students for a two-year period as part of the blended classroom program being used in her school and other sites throughout the school district. Given the socioeconomic circumstances of her students, there was some attrition during that time. Only about 3/4ths of the class remained in tact for the two-year period.

Results

While the results of this recently completed study are still being analyzed, some evidence has emerged that is worthy of sharing at this time. Anne Marie found that her class was easier to manage than the class she had the year before. She and I both felt this result was due to the fact that she had established clear expectations at the beginning of the year and, when misbehaviors did occur, she only had to remind her students of the skills she already had taught them. She did not have to make up new rules or try to quash unexpected behaviors. In addition, the rules were not only few in number but also very comprehensive, with wording such as "We will keep our classroom a safe and healthy place." As such, the rules could easily be applied to any number of behaviors and reminding the students of the rules usually took the form of, "Ask yourself if your actions are protecting the health and safety of everyone here."

Anne Marie found that, as a result of the clear expectations and follow-up, she had more time to spend with students on a rotating basis, working with them in small groups or one-on-one tutoring to help build their academic skills. She did not have to constantly monitor every action of every student in order to maintain a safe and productive learning community.

The other attendant finding was one that neither of us expected but from which we learned a great deal. We found that any interruption in the regular schedule for class meetings meant that Anne Marie would have to teach some self-discipline skill again. When the opportunity to revisit classroom expectations during class meetings was forfeited, students seemed to regress in their behaviors. It was clear to both of us that regular class meetings were a key component to the success of this approach. Anne Marie and I found that a skipped class meeting was interpreted by the students as an indication that the skills being taught were not valued by the adults, and therefore, not really important. Accordingly, the class meeting schedule had to be faithfully followed or, if not, then it could only yield to school-imposed schedule changes.

Educational Importance of the Study

Teachers at every grade level in every setting are wrestling with the realities of trying to effectively manage and teach an increasingly diverse range of needs and interests presented by their students. Strategies that support safe and productive classrooms in which learning can occur are valuable tools for teachers. Good teachers already know this but, in the interests of time, will often look to a "canned" curriculum program that they can periodically insert into their classroom curriculum. We found that ensuring flexibility for meeting individual needs by avoiding prefabricated programs was essential for any successful outcomes to the study. And, the flexibility of conversation topics for class meetings was equally essential.

We also found that students began to incorporate the strategies they were learning in their classroom into other interactions happening outside the classroom. They were overheard using the language of problem solving during recess and at other times when

they were not in direct contact with their teacher. The language of citizenship led to many discussions about rights and responsibilities in school, some occurring at a fairly sophisticated level. Anne Marie often would use newspaper topics as a springboard for the discussions.

After the tragedy of Columbine, Anne Marie helped her students to grapple with their natural fears and concerns about the incident. Later, as newspapers began to carry stories about students being expelled for wearing black trenchcoats, Anne Marie led a discussion about the issues of dress as opposed to issues of violence. The students were equally divided in their feelings; some advocated banning black trenchcoats and some felt that students not hurting each other were really the core issue. As the discussion progressed, I put on my blue trenchcoat and walked to the front of the room. The students began to say things like "Can she wear a blue trenchcoat?" "She's nice, so does that make it ok?" "What if her coat was black? Would it still be ok?" While they reached no conclusions, the value of the discussion lay in their grappling with First Amendment issues and the need to keep schools safe.

One strategy the class developed for conflict resolution was to draw a face on their hands when they were feeling threatened or upset. They would tell the other student who was expressing anger or telling them something they did not like to hear to, "Say it to my hand." It was a way of depersonalizing the encounter so that they could respond in a manner that was reasonable, appropriate, and calm. During the last week of the school year, I told the class that I was moving to California and began to talk about how much I had enjoyed working with them. Some of the students and I had developed close relationships and we cared deeply about each other. As I spoke, the students

spontaneously began drawing faces on their hands. First a few, and then nearly all of them, held their hands up saying, "Tell it to my hand." The moment was emotionally difficult for all of us and their response made a great deal of sense to me since so many people came and went in their lives.

I am now beginning the same work as a school-wide program with a middle school located on the Los Angeles County line. The population is very diverse, many students are living at or below the poverty line, and the incidents of violence in the school occur on a regular basis. The study is scheduled to begin by next September and I will be working only with those teachers who have expressed an interest. After the program establishes a foothold, it will move out to other classrooms.

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